

Significant Directives of Nurturing Care Framework and Early Childhood Care

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ABSTRACT

The Nurturing Care Framework (NCF), introduced in 2018 by the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, and the World Bank Group, serves as a global strategy to advance optimal early childhood development (ECD). Anchored in scientific evidence, the framework emphasizes five interrelated components: good health, adequate nutrition, responsive caregiving, security and safety, and opportunities for early learning. This paper explores the profound significance of child care and child-rearing practices within the NCF, examining their pivotal role in fostering holistic development during the early years. It delves into how these practices influence cognitive, emotional, and physical growth, creating a foundation for lifelong learning and well-being. The paper further investigates the challenges in implementing child care and rearing practices, such as resource constraints, cultural variations, and policy gaps, which hinder the effective execution of the NCF in diverse contexts. A critical analysis of the Nurturing Care Framework's alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) highlights its contributions to ensuring quality education (SDG 4), promoting health (SDG 3), and reducing inequalities (SDG 10). This synergy underscores the framework's role in advancing global development agendas. Additionally, the study reviews global and national efforts in implementing the NCF and SDGs, identifying best practices and barriers to success. Insights from related literature offer a nuanced understanding of how nurturing care intersects with child development outcomes and broader societal goals. The findings emphasize that an integrated approach to child care and rearing, guided by the NCF, is essential for achieving sustainable development and equity in child development. This paper concludes with policy recommendations to enhance the implementation of the Nurturing Care Framework, ensuring it continues to impact children, families, and societies globally.

Keywords: Nurturing Care Framework (NCF), Early Childhood Development (ECD), World Health Organization (WHO), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), United Nations Children's Fund UNICEF

INTRODUCTION

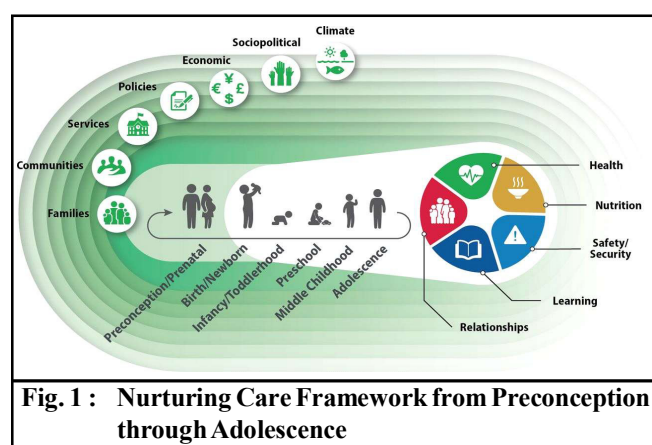
The Nurturing Care Framework (NCF) is a global strategy jointly developed by the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, and the World Bank Group in 2018 to promote optimal early childhood development (ECD). This framework underscores the critical role of caregiving environments in fostering the holistic development of children, encompassing their physical, cognitive, and emotional well-being from birth to age five. The Nurturing Care Framework (NCF) is

founded on five essential components crucial for children's holistic development. These components include ensuring good health through access to healthcare services and promoting healthy lifestyles, providing adequate nutrition to support physical and cognitive growth, offering responsive caregiving to meet children's emotional and developmental needs, ensuring security and safety to create a nurturing environment, and providing opportunities for early learning to support cognitive, social, and emotional development. By aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), precisely Goal

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3 (Good Health and Well-being) and Goal 4 (Quality Education), the framework presents a clear roadmap for addressing poverty and inequality through early interventions that improve developmental outcomes (World Health Organization, 2018).

The NCF is particularly significant in the context of sustainable development goals (SDGs), as it directly addresses the critical early years of life, a period essential for shaping human capital, reducing inequality, and promoting lifelong health and well-being. Numerous studies underline the role of nurturing care in fostering early childhood development and, by extension, achieving global developmental goals, emphasising ensuring that children receive nurturing care during their early years, which can significantly boost their cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical development, setting them up for success in the future. Also, The Lancet series on early childhood development underscores the importance of interventions that focus on enhancing caregiving practices, as they can positively impact a child's brain development, ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes and greater economic productivity in adulthood. Fig. 1 shows the WHO–UNICEF–Lancet Commission's call to invest in the health and well-being of children and adolescents by reviewing evidence for the application of NC in six developmental periods: preconception/prenatal, newborn/birth, infancy/toddlerhood, preschool, middle childhood, and adolescence (Black *et al.*, 2017).



The Nurturing Care Framework is underpinned by extensive research in early childhood interventions, highlighting the enduring advantages of investing in the early years, both at an individual and societal level, considering the nurturing care framework and the requirement for multisectoral inputs to foster

developmental potential, the primary method for enhanced and effective execution is the adoption of multisectoral intervention packages. This necessitates the identification of pertinent delivery platforms for effective services that can be consolidated to meet the evolving needs of young children and their caregivers, potentially involving the aggregation of interventions to form a specific childcare package or the coordination of services across and within sectors. A conducive environment for multi-sectoral strategies necessitates synchronised national policies and actionable, budgeted plans overseen by a coordinating entity at national and subnational tiers. High-quality early childhood programs, especially those integrating health and education interventions, contribute to the overall achievement of the SDGs by improving childhood survival, reducing poverty, and enhancing social equity, as per meta-analysis (Britto *et al.*, 2014). The ECD agenda and the nurturing care framework offer a chance to develop evidence-based, comprehensive care programs for children that recognise all the outcomes (e.g., learning, safety and protection, nutritional well-being, mental health, and physical health) and are essential for children to thrive.

Significance of Child Care and Child Rearing:

The Nurturing Care Framework (NCF) is a comprehensive approach developed collaboratively by the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, and the World Bank to promote optimal physical, emotional, and cognitive development for young children. This framework highlights the critical role of childcare and child-rearing practices in fostering holistic development, particularly during the formative years when brain development is most active (Nurturing Care – Nazarene Theological Seminary, 2024)

Why Nurturing Care?:

Early childhood development is among a nation's most advantageous investments to enhance economic growth, foster peaceful and sustainable communities, and eradicate severe poverty and inequality. Investing in early childhood development is essential to ensure the right of every kid to live and flourish (The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child. New York: United Nations; 1989). All children need caring care to realise their full potential, essential for healthy growth and development. The period from gestation to three years of life, during which the brain is most receptive to environmental factors, is critical. Nurturing care fosters

physical, emotional, social, and cognitive growth while safeguarding early children from the detrimental impacts of adversity. It generates enduring and intergenerational health, production, and social cohesion advantages. Nurturing care addresses the essential requirements of young children, including health, adequate nutrition, security, safety, early learning opportunities, and responsive caring. Parents, families, and other primary caregivers are the principal loving care providers. Policies, programs, and services must be established to empower them and their communities to fulfil all the requirements of young children.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health prioritise the development of young children, seeing it as essential to the global change aimed for by 2030. One of their common objectives is to guarantee that all boys and girls have access to excellent early childhood development (SDG goal 4.2) (Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. New York: United Nations; 2015). In the following discussion, we will delve into the significance of child care and child-rearing within the context of the Nurturing Care Framework.

Child Care and Child Rearing: Definitions and Importance:

Child care and child-rearing are central to the Nurturing Care Framework. Child care refers to providing necessary care, support, and supervision to children, mainly when parents or guardians are unavailable. On the other hand, child-rearing involves the broader process of raising a child, including the physical, emotional, and cognitive guidance caregivers provide. Research has shown that high-quality child care and effective child-rearing practices are essential for promoting healthy development. A nurturing environment contributes to forming secure attachments, foundational to a child's emotional well-being and capacity to form relationships later in life. In this sense, childcare and child-rearing practices are directly aligned with the goals of the Nurturing Care Framework (Britto *et al.*, 2017).

The Role of Child Care in the Nurturing Care Framework:

Child care ensures that children receive consistent and quality care, particularly in formal or institutional settings. According to the NCF, childcare environments

should offer more than just basic needs; they should promote early learning and responsive caregiving. High-quality childcare facilities provide structured learning activities, opportunities for social interaction, and safe spaces that foster cognitive and physical development (Engle *et al.*, 2011). Childcare providers play a crucial role in promoting the principles of the NCF by creating a stimulating and supportive environment. They contribute to early learning by engaging children in age-appropriate activities and encouraging exploratory behaviours. These activities lay the groundwork for academic success and lifelong learning (WHO, 2018).

The Role of Child Rearing in the Nurturing Care Framework:

Child-rearing practices are equally important in implementing the Nurturing Care Framework. Responsive caregiving, one of the framework's core components, emphasises the importance of parental engagement in the early stages of development. Caregivers are encouraged to respond to a child's needs with warmth, understanding, and attentiveness, fostering secure attachments and emotional stability (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). Responsive caregiving is a direct outcome of child-rearing practices focusing on positive reinforcement, communication, and emotional support. These practices are crucial during early childhood, when children are most vulnerable to external influences. The NCF stresses that caregivers must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to provide nurturing care, which includes engaging in consistent and loving interactions with their children (Britto *et al.*, 2017).

Impact of Child Care and Child Rearing on Child Development:

Research supports the notion that nurturing child care and child-rearing practices positively impact all domains of child development—cognitive, emotional, physical, and social. For example, children who experience responsive caregiving and structured learning environments are more likely to develop strong cognitive and language skills. Likewise, secure attachments formed through responsive child-rearing practices are associated with higher emotional regulation and social competence levels. NCF pointed out that integrating childcare and child-rearing practices that emphasise responsive caregiving, early learning, and a secure environment can significantly enhance a child's ability to thrive.

Furthermore, these practices can mitigate the effects of poverty, malnutrition, and other adverse conditions by providing children with stable, nurturing environments (Engle *et al.*, 2011).

Challenges in Implementing Child Care and Child Rearing Practices in the NCF:

While the Nurturing Care Framework highlights the importance of child care and child-rearing, several challenges hinder its full implementation. Socioeconomic disparities, lack of access to quality child care, and inadequate parental education are significant barriers in many low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (Britto *et al.*, 2017). In such contexts, families often lack the resources to provide stimulating environments or access formal childcare facilities. Additionally, cultural differences in child-rearing practices may influence how the NCF is applied. For instance, some cultures prioritise collective child-rearing by extended families, while others may emphasise independence at a younger age. These variations must be considered when promoting the NCF across diverse populations (Super and Harkness, 1986).

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their Significance in the Nurturing Care Framework:

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), established by the United Nations in 2015, are a set of 17 interconnected global objectives to foster peace, prosperity, and environmental sustainability by 2030. These goals provide a robust framework for addressing pressing global issues such as poverty, inequality, and climate change. The Nurturing Care Framework (NCF), introduced by WHO, UNICEF, and the World Bank, explicitly bolsters early childhood development (ECD) and closely aligns with multiple SDGs. This framework prioritises health, nutrition, safety, and early learning, critical components for ensuring a child's optimal growth. The SDGs and NCF synergy underscore the potential for integrating global and national initiatives to advance comprehensive early childhood development. Alignment of SDGs with the Nurturing Care Framework (NCF Final Report 2018 - 2023)

SDG 2: Zero Hunger

It seeks to end hunger, achieve food security, and improve nutrition. The NCF aligns with this goal by prioritising nutrition as one of its core components. Adequate nutrition is essential for brain development and

physical growth, especially in the first 1,000 days of a child's life. The NCF promotes breastfeeding, complementary feeding, and appropriate micronutrient intake, contributing to the achievement of SDG 2 (UNICEF, 2018).

SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being

It aims to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being. This goal is crucial in the Nurturing Care Framework context as it emphasises child health, maternal health, child mortality, and access to healthcare services. The NCF's focus on health services like *prenatal care and immunisation* directly supports SDG 3 by ensuring that children receive adequate medical attention during their formative years, reducing the risks of early childhood diseases and improving survival rates (WHO, 2018).

SDG 4: Quality Education

It focuses on inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities. Early learning is fundamental to the Nurturing Care Framework, which advocates for stimulating environments and early childhood education (ECE). Teachers, healthcare providers, especially paediatricians and primary care physicians, can quickly provide access and monitoring for these drivers of responsive caregiving and early learning (Glascoe and Dworkin, 1995; Lipkin *et al.*, 2020). Speech Language Pathologists may complement this framework with topic expertise on Core developmental components, including social communication, speech, language, and literacy abilities. Intervention assistance for typical and atypical vocabulary and literacy development (Heidlage *et al.*, 2020; Lense and Camarata, 2020).

SDG 5: Gender Equality

It emphasises the need for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. The Nurturing Care Framework intersects with this goal by addressing gender disparities in childcare. It advocates for fathers' involvement in *caregiving roles* and promotes equitable access to resources for girls and boys, reducing gender biases in early childhood care (Richter *et al.*, 2017).

SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation

It ensures access to clean water and sanitation for all. Safe water, sanitation, and hygiene are critical components of the Nurturing Care Framework, as they

directly affect children's health and development. Children need access to clean drinking water and hygienic environments to prevent the spreading of diseases and malnutrition caused by waterborne pathogens (WHO, 2018).

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) depends on children developing human capital through trajectories that enhance their capabilities in early development and throughout the initial two decades of life. As global challenges persist and evolve, success relies on implementing a comprehensive framework encompassing NC's fundamental elements (health, nutrition, learning, responsive relationships, safety and security), equity, and human rights. The primary objective is implemented through the Global Strategy for Women's, Children's, and Adolescents' Health, which outlines a plan of action to guarantee that children survive and flourish in improved environments conducive to their health and well-being. In collaboration with governments and stakeholders, the vision advanced by WHO and UNICEF aims to enhance policies, systems, and services to ensure the survival and well-being of children and adolescents. The NCF is integrated into the daily activities of families and supported by relationships with communities, services, and policies. It recognises the influence of economic, sociopolitical, and climatic factors, including unforeseen events such as pandemics and other humanitarian disasters. The NCF promotes concepts strategically designed to enhance human capital from preconception through adolescence. These concepts aim to improve the well-being of marginalised groups, mitigate adversities, and support the achievement of the SDGs, ensuring that all children and adolescents reach their developmental potential (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2019).

The Role of the Nurturing Care Framework in Achieving SDGs:

The Nurturing Care Framework provides a comprehensive strategy for promoting ECD by addressing the interrelated health, nutrition, and education domains. By supporting national and global efforts toward SDG achievement, the NCF helps create environments where children can thrive. Governmental policies that align with the SDGs and the NCF promote well-being for individual children and broader societal growth, as healthy, educated children contribute to sustainable economic and social development (Black *et al.*, 2017).

Global and National Efforts in the Implementation of SDGs and Nurturing Care:

Globally, countries have adopted the SDGs within their national policies, and many have integrated the principles of the Nurturing Care Framework into their ECD programs. For instance, India's Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) is a large-scale initiative that aligns with the SDGs and NCF by providing health, nutrition, and education services to children under six (Bhatia, 2018). In addition, partnerships between governments, non-governmental organisations, and international agencies are essential for successfully implementing these frameworks. Such collaborations ensure that children receive the support they need during their most crucial years of development (WHO, 2018).

Review of Related Literature on Nurturing Care Framework:

Based on human rights and connected to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, the WHO's Nurturing Care Framework (NCF) encourages cooperation and inclusion while addressing children's impairments through ECD policies (Wertlieb, 2019). Promoting community engagement, responsive caring, and better nutrition for mothers and children. Further, sustained implementation using evidence-based practices and cross-sectoral collaboration aims to promote equitable, all-encompassing development (Black, 2021). Moreover, several loving care methods improve Early Childhood Development (ECD) through early learning, security, nutrition, and health. Effective ECD strategies are demonstrated by models such as Reach Up and Learn (Jamaica), One Sky (China), and Aarambh (India) in a variety of socioeconomic circumstances (Sundar *et al.*, 2024).

The use of nurturing care interventions emphasises the benefits for child development, especially in underprivileged populations (Gupta *et al.*, 2021). In order to improve cognitive and socioemotional outcomes during the crucial first 1,000 days, the Nurturing Care Framework (NCF) combines early learning, nutrition, health, and carer support (Richter *et al.*, 2019). To incorporate the effect, success in Maharashtra led to broader adoption in other districts, highlighting the necessity of ongoing government assistance and local adaptation. Furthermore, the advantages of ECD are further reinforced by parenting interventions connected to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Despite implementation obstacles, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is

evidence of enhanced outcomes in various scenarios (Sanders *et al.*, 2021).

When the emphasis is on how early experiences affect health, well-being, and socio-economic, especially in low- and middle-income nations, it results throughout life, where disparities are sustained by inadequate access to services (Schiariti *et al.*, 2021). As we focus on the Nurturing Care Framework (NCF), it relates children's cognitive and socio-emotional development to responsive parenting, supportive settings, and access to health and education (Black and Trude, 2019). According to data from the MAL-ED research, early adversities, such as hunger and unfavourable living situations, impede development but can be lessened by caring care (Britto *et al.*, 2017). The results support including ECD programs in international health policies to promote long-term advantages and aid in accomplishing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The basis for long-term health, cognitive abilities, and socioeconomic stability is laid by the crucial early childhood development (ECD) period, which spans from conception to age eight (Margaret and Kumar, 2023). Owing to fast neurodevelopment, the first 1,000 days are significant, and for the best results, responsive caring, proper nutrition, and hygiene are all necessary. Better neurodevelopment and productivity are associated with nurturing care that encompasses health, safety, and early learning. To protect children's development and stop exploitation and neglect, a rights-based strategy is supported by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Uchitel *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, to reduce inequalities in low-resource environments, collaborative, multi-sectoral strategies that include social and health assistance are advised (Mukherjee *et al.*, 2021).

In order to create the best possible environment for children's well-being, an emphasis on loving care, responsive caregiving, health, nutrition, safety, and learning opportunities are to be concentrated. According to Jamieson and Richter (2017), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) encourage inclusivity. It discusses healthcare disparities in India, which impede the achievement of SDG 3 and are especially prevalent in rural and marginalised areas (Kumar and Roy, 2024). When we look into child mortality trends, there has been a notable decrease in the mortality rate for children under five (Rajaratnam *et al.*, 2010).

Discussion and Conclusion:

The Nurturing Care Framework (NCF), initiated in

2018, signifies a worldwide pledge to guarantee that all children have the essential nurturing care for their healthy development. The current status report for 2018-2023 evaluates the accomplishments of this framework and delineates future strategies for improving early childhood development (ECD) efforts globally.

The NCF is founded on five strategic measures designed to promote an environment favourable to early childhood development:

- *Health*: Guaranteeing access to fundamental health services.
- *Nutrients*: Ensuring sufficient nutrients to facilitate growth and development.
- *Responsive caregiving*: Fostering constructive interactions between caregivers and children.
- *Early education*: Promoting possibilities for cognitive and social advancement.
- *Protection*: Shielding children from violence, maltreatment, and neglect.

These components are essential in meeting the needs of children, especially those from underprivileged homes who are at risk of failing to achieve their full developmental potential (World Health Organization and Nations, 2023; WHO and UNICEF, 2023).

Accomplishments from 2018 until 2023:

The report emphasises numerous notable accomplishments during the preceding five years. Development of Global Measures: New global metrics for population-level evaluations of Early Childhood Development (ECD) have been created. This encompasses establishing ECD profiles for 197 nations and enhancing the monitoring of progress and results (World Health Organization, 2018).

- *Research Repository*: A comprehensive research archive has been established, offering significant insights into effective interventions and techniques for enhancing child development outcomes.
- The framework has effectively impacted policy across several levels, prompting governments to incorporate nurturing care ideas into national health and education policies.
- *Community Engagement*: Initiatives have been activated at subnational levels, fostering community-based programs that target local needs and utilise local resources to assist Early Childhood Development (ECD).

- *Capacity Building*: Initiatives have been undertaken to enhance system capabilities and implement nurturing care interventions efficiently. This includes the education of healthcare practitioners and educators regarding the significance of responsive caregiving and early learning opportunities (World Health Organization and Nations, 2023).

Considerations on Execution:

The report examines the coordinated efforts across sectors to execute the NCF. Key informants said that successful implementation frequently relies on the following:

- *Intersectoral Collaboration*: Collaborative alliances among health, education, and social sectors have been essential in providing holistic assistance to families.
- *Utilisation of Local Evidence*: Locally generated data has guided policy decisions and program designs, ensuring interventions are pertinent and compelling.
- *Community-Centric Strategies*: Involving communities in the design and implementation of services has customised programs to address particular local requirements, thereby enhancing participation and efficacy (World Health Organization and Nations, 2023; WHO and UNICEF, 2023).

Challenges and Domains for Future Emphasis:

Notwithstanding these accomplishments, the report delineates some difficulties that require attention in the future:

- *Disparities in Equity*: Substantial inequalities persist in access to loving care services, especially for underprivileged groups. Future initiatives must prioritise engaging these at-risk populations to guarantee equal results.
- *Program Sustainability*: Sustained finance and political commitment are essential to preserve momentum in the implementation of nurturing care projects.
- *Assessment and Oversight*: Improved systems for monitoring and assessing the effectiveness of nurturing care treatments are essential for ensuring accountability and ongoing enhancement (WHO and UNICEF, 2023).

All stakeholders, including governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), communities, and families, are urged to continue prioritising nurturing care as a fundamental right for all children. This call to action is included in the report's conclusion. It emphasises the significance of incorporating loving care into broader development agendas to create sustainable progress in the development of young children. Since its beginning in 2018, the Nurturing Care Framework has achieved remarkable progress, as discussed in the following summary. There is the potential for stakeholders to work together toward a future where all children can flourish via nurturing care by reflecting on past accomplishments while simultaneously tackling ongoing obstacles.

The Nurturing Care Framework (NCF) signifies a crucial progression in our comprehension of early childhood development, highlighting the significant influence of caregiving on children's comprehensive growth. This research demonstrates that the NCF is not simply a collection of guidelines but an all-encompassing strategy that unifies health, nutrition, safety, early learning, and responsive caregiving to enhance developmental outcomes for children from birth to age five. This paradigm correlates perfectly with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially those about health and education, highlighting its importance in tackling global issues like poverty and inequality.

The execution of the Nurturing Care Framework is crucial for cultivating an atmosphere conducive to the flourishing of all children. The research demonstrates that investing in early childhood care and education produces substantial returns, improving individual life outcomes and fostering broader community advantages, including economic productivity and social cohesiveness. Nonetheless, actualising the complete potential of the NCF requires surmounting significant obstacles, such as socioeconomic inequalities and cultural differences in caregiving methodologies.

To attain these lofty objectives, a coordinated effort from governments, communities, and families must establish supporting policies and programs that empower caregivers and provide access to excellent services. By emphasising nurturing care, we can reshape the developmental environment for future generations, guaranteeing that every kid has the opportunity to achieve their full potential. This dedication to fostering care is not merely an investment in human lives but a crucial measure for constructing healthier, more equal societies globally.

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